

Performance Improvement from Courageous Conversations

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Sometimes those of us in a Leadership role must address poor quality or poor performance from our people. How we handle this task is critically important to the success of the organization, as no entity is perfect, because we humans are imperfect. Great leaders quickly seek to identify quality issues and make sure they have processes and systems in place to address and improve poor performance by individuals and groups within the organization. But fancy processes and systems won't do much good if the leader doesn't know how to have courageous conversations with the people who need to make improvements.

So how do you have a courageous conversation to improve performance? The same principles apply that I stated in our Orenda Education YouTube Channel video #10 titled Conflict Resolution through Courageous Conversations, but in this lecture I will provide specific strategies that are more specific to **performance conflicts** with an employee.

First, you must create the conditions for a Courageous Conversation.

Step 1. Decide on where to meet. The courageous conversation should take place in a safe place to talk without interruptions. Not in the supervisors' office, if it can be avoided, especially with your first courageous conversation. A neutral site is best.

Step 2. Personal self-reflect. Do a heart check. Before you meet, consider the following. This is a critically important question: What is your attitude and belief about this persons' intent?

Do you believe this person wants to do their best, or not? As the supervisor you will have more success in motivating your people when they sense that you are approaching them with an assumption of positive intent. I can't stress that enough. They need to believe that you believe, they want to do their best. In other words, the conversation will always go better when you enter it assuming the best in the other, not the worst.

Step 3. Put yourself in their shoes. Ask yourself, what do you imagine they need to meet your expectations? Keep that answer in your hip pocket as you get ready to meet with them. Soon you will find out if your assumptions going in were correct.

Now let's talk about having the Courageous Conversation. How should it go?

Step 1. Start off with a statement on safety. Once together, start by assuring them that they are safe to express themselves without judgement.

Step 2. Now say something positive about the person, the value you believe they bring to the school. Something you have seen that they do well. Someway they have contributed to the school mission.

Step 3. Express and confirm a mutual purpose and benefit. Assure them that you care about their goals, what they want, and that you want to trust their motives.

During the Conversation the Key is to Maintain SAFETY & MUTUAL BENEFIT.

Watch for signs you, or the other person, is feeling fear. If you do, you must address it, reaffirm safety, and then state what you don't want – such as fear, silence, or resentment -- before continuing. Instead, clarify again what you both want, and then bring those mutual goals back to the conversation table.

Now Address the Performance Issue

Some performance problems are simply people not fulfilling expectations contained in the company Employee Handbook, Manual, a written Plan, Policy, Procedure, Process, or for teachers, their student achievement scores. Other performance issues are more individualized. You as the leader determine how high is the mountain range you expect that employee to climb. Your people need to see, hear and watch you communicate your expectation of excellence, what that mountain top looks like, and the results it should produce when they get there. When you do this, you are letting them know what your boundaries are. What you expect, and what you will not tolerate. Great leaders know what their personal boundaries are, and they communicate them often, and **in a humble tone**.

Here at Orenda Education we expect our leaders to speak to our people about reaching the peak of their potential. So when an employee has let you down, you must address it.

Start the performance improvement courageous conversation by:

Step 1. Simply describe THE GAP between what was expected (what I like to refer to as your “Mountain Top Expectations” for them), and what you are getting, their actual performance. Focus on facts. Boil it down to one sentence. Do not address it as a violation of a code, rule, manual, etc. (that is something an IRS agent would say). You don't want to create fear or defensiveness. They are your employee, not an adversary. Because it is so important that you maintain safety and trust during the conversation, simply explain the gap between what was expected and what actually occurred.

Step 2. Now ask, “What happened?” Listen to their response. What does it reveal? Look at the Gap Chart below and see how their response fits into this chart?

Looking at the top row in the chart, is the gap in performance caused by a lack of knowledge. Did they know of these expectations?

Is the gap because they lack motivation? Do they want to meet your expectations? Do others they work with expect them to meet the expectation? Is the school culture motivational or not?

Maybe the gap is caused by a lack of ability? If so, can you coach them up? Are they capable if given the proper training and support?

Looking at the first column, was the gap influenced by personal, social, or structural factors?

As a leader and mentor of your people, it is your role to be both motivational, to raise your people up, yet concise in both your praise of what they do well, but also in your direct communication of where you need them to pick it up.

Possible Causes of Gaps between Expectations/Targets & Observable Facts	KNOWLEDGE	MOTIVATION	ABILITY
Personal	Know To: Was the expectation made known to them? Did they seek to understand the expectation?	Want To: Do they want to meet the expectation?	Can Do: Can others do what is required of this person? Does the expectation play to their strengths?
Social	Taught To: Did they just go on what someone else or others told them?	Peer Pressure: Do others praise and support the desired expectation or pressure against it?	Help from Others: Are people around them a help or hindrance?
Structural	Afraid To: Are they threatened in some way by the expectation?	Carrots & Sticks: Is the reward system aligned with the expectation?	The Environment: Do the things around them provide a bridge or barrier to accomplishment?

Step 3. Based on these factors, jointly develop a plan of action to close the gap. The action developed to improve performance will be based partly on the employee's response. Elicit their ideas on how to close the gap. For example, if the gap was from the employee not knowing about the performance expectation, then the plan is simply to make them aware. If the employee did not bother to read or watch something already made available to them, then the gap may also contain a motivational cause that needs to be addressed in the action plan.

For Knowledge Causes: The action plan will be how to assure they gain the knowledge necessary to meet the expectation. The action plan may also address other factors that contributed to their lack of knowledge.

For Motivational Causes: The action plan will need to be motivational. It could include consequences or rewards. Search for consequences and rewards that matter to this person. Illicit

their ideas. Link the action plan to a mutual benefit and shared purpose that everyone gains from the expectation being met.

For Ability Causes: The action plan will probably need to include some additional training, mentoring, or other supplemental help. Put a timeline on it.

Remember, you are in this together. Improved performance takes both the employee and their supervisor working together for a shared purpose and mutual benefit. The performance improvement action plan should contain a time-line with either a Check-Up (something the supervisor does), or a Check-In (something the employee is to do).

Some Final Thoughts on Legal, Personnel Documentation, and Filing

Until the performance gaps become a pattern and habitual, you don't need to file documentation of these courageous conversations on performance with the Human Resources department to have it placed into the employee's official personnel file. In fact, you don't need to involve the HR department at all. Just maintain the documentation you need of these conversations with you as reminders to you and the employee.

If the performance gaps become a pattern, habitual with little to no improvement within the agreed upon timelines, and you have lost complete trust in this employee's willingness or ability to meet the expectations -- alert your supervisor. It is now time to involve the HR department. Follow their instructions on how HR needs you to document to assure compliance with all employment laws. When you get to this point it usually means termination of the employee is forthcoming, and sometimes that is best for both the organization and that employee.

Well, there you have it. If you follow these principles, you should make some significant progress toward improved performance from that employee. It may take more than one courageous conversation, and that is OK. We just want our people to dialogue, engage, and to seek understanding and mutual respect. Yes, this type of conversation can be difficult, but at Orenda Education we trust our people to muster up the courage to have them.